

# The Teaching of Geriatric Medicine in the Nursing Home

**T**he Dean's Page has recently reported on the changing forces affecting the education of physicians. Shorter stays for sicker patients in teaching hospitals together with much more sophisticated outpatient medical care is forcing colleges of medicine to move their major teaching emphasis to the outpatient clinic. Below we consider yet another force affecting the locale for the education of students and residents of medicine: the care of the elderly.

The demography of aging has become familiar to most of us. In the United States the over 65 segment of our population has grown from 3 million persons in 1900 to 25 million in 1980. By the year 2030 almost one quarter of Americans will be over age 65. The 85-plus population is increasing even more rapidly with a seven-fold increase projected by the middle of next century. This growing number of elderly brings the concomitant problems of increased morbidity and a changing style of care for severe problems of frailty, dementia, incontinence, fractures and multiple illnesses. Nursing homes frequently provide the location for medical response to the long term care needs necessitated by these problems.

Between 1963 and the present, nursing home occupancy by the nation's elderly at any given time increased from 2.5% to 5.0%. One in 20 persons age 65 and over resides in one of the estimated 19,000 nursing homes across the country at an

annual bill of over \$30 billion. One in 4 persons will use nursing home services at some time during their later years. By the year 2030 the number of residents in nursing homes in the United States will have grown from 1 million to nearly 4 million and the cost will have skyrocketed to over 1 trillion dollars. The remarkable increase in the number of new nursing homes is an obvious confirmation of the trends. However, these trends have had little impact on medical education. Knight Steel, M.D., former president of the American Geriatrics Society, pointed out that until a few years ago the number of medical faculty providing either service or teaching within a nursing home approached zero.

The development of teaching nursing homes associated with medical schools is both an opportunity and a necessity. As teaching hospitals concentrate on acutely ill and exceedingly complex patients for ever shorter periods of time, the opportunities for teaching basic medicine, especially to beginning medical students, becomes limited. Shift of student training to outpatient clinics will be the primary response of medical schools, but outpatient care does not lend itself to the thorough examination and meticulous review which is so necessary for teaching the fundamentals of medicine. The teaching nursing home provides an opportunity to introduce students to a less hurried approach to comprehensive care.

Physicians will find a greatly increasing portion of their time devoted to nursing home care, yet at present our graduates have received almost no training to prepare them for the unique problems and opportunities to be found there. Classically, nursing homes have been the instrument of nurses. Physicians have traditionally limited their involvement in the nursing home. In the future the physician will take on a larger role, more akin to present physician activities within the acute hospital. The most striking difference will be that care provision will be much more collaborative in nature using teams consisting of nurses, social workers, physical therapists and other aides who are so essential to quality care of the nursing home resident.

Teaching nursing homes like the teaching hospital as it exists today will make up only a small proportion of the nation's institutions. Critics have appropriately worried that costs in a teaching nursing home will be higher than comparable nursing homes. While this is undoubtedly true, it is no more true for the teaching nursing home than for the teaching hospital and is a justifiable price for the education of physicians who must perform with ever higher standards.

Also like the teaching hospital, the teaching nursing home will be concerned with research. Research among nursing home residents, as with their medical care, must be selected with the individual's quality of life and personal wishes ever in mind.

The problems of dementia, incontinence, poor mobility, rehabilitation of the elderly, the ramifications of polypharmacy, depression and improvements in socialization are but a few of the areas that have begun to be studied and which are appropriate for the improvement of the quality of life of nursing home residents.

These issues are now being approached by medical schools throughout the United States and the University of Arizona. The evolution of the medical curriculum has already demanded an increased emphasis on geriatrics. The addition of a Teaching Nursing Home will be a major step toward our goal of improving care of the elderly. ■

John T. Boyer, M.D.  
Director  
Restorative Medicine  
Theodore H. Koff, Ed.D.  
Director  
Long Term Care Gerontology Center  
Louis J. Kettel, M.D.  
Dean  
College of Medicine  
University of Arizona

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